ABSTRACT

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MIXED RACE IDEOLOGIES OF HARLEM RENNAISANCE LITERATURE AND CULTURE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF NELLA LARSEN

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This study of Nella Larsen's life as a mulatto reveals her true feelings for the practice of passing, and challenges the traditional notion of the definition of and the representation of the tragic mulatto figure in American life, generally, and in American literature, specifically. Her 1928 offering, Quicksand the novel directly following in 1929, Passing, are examined and deemed to be a novels remarkable for their defense of acknowledging racial duality rather than choosing a single "racial side." After close examination, this concept is also apparent in Larsen's own life. She refused to choose a single racial side, neither defining herself as black or white. This racial defiance manifests itself in a parallel manner, reflected both in her life and literature. Given these elements, the conclusions of this study reveal that one cannot divorce a discussion of the literary works of Nella Larsen from her life as a mixed race individual in America.

MIXED RACE IDEOLOGIES OF HARLEM RENNAISANCE LITERATURE AND CULTURE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF NELLA LARSEN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For America, racial pluralism began when the first Europeans arrived at its shores. While the early history of America shows a small variety of European cultural groups and existing Native American tribes made up the primary racial units in the first part of the story of this nation, there were very early signs during America's colonialization that race and ethnicity would be an overpowering factor in the identity and development of this land, and it was, indeed so. From the period of early colonial settlements, to the years directly preceding the Civil War, from the post-antebellum era into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the onset of modern America, racial plurality would define this country and divide it simultaneously, and it continues to do so. Race and its definitions and implications would be written in and out of American history in assorted ways by historians, sociologists, and literary figures. Indeed, the systems of slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, desegregation, multiculturalism, and mass immigration have each been attached to the nation's identity in some way. In America, race would become a quality worth celebrating, yet it would be unforgiving in its influence on the individual American experience of some races specifically, and on America as a country, broadly. Indeed, the inhabitants of America have never been ignorant or indifferent to race or the volatile, moral and principled influence that race has on this country's history. Race has

been the cause of violent unrest and peaceful protests. It has been the cause of economic stratification, and it has been debated in classrooms, contemplated by scholars, and written about in history books and literary texts, both fiction and nonfiction. In many contexts, various racial and ethnic groups have been unfavorably affected by America's pluralistic history. Yet none perhaps have been more influenced than those individuals of color, with identifiable African ancestry.

Slavery, of course, left the largest imprint on the lives of Americans with African ancestry, or African Americans, and this stifling experience along with post-slavery racial marginalism taught hard lessons of survival for these individuals. People with African ancestry in America were torn apart as a result of the Middle Passage, and they have since worked, unsuccessfully, to fully restore the strong bonds of family that were established by African ancestors. When slavery began, so did the separation of black families on African soil. The largest forced immigration in world history began tearing families apart when the first male slaves were captured in the villages of West Africa. The dismantlement of these families continued for over four hundred years and spanned the Atlantic Ocean onto American soil. The rape of African women during slavery, mass lynching of people of color post-slavery, severe economic challenges over a long period of time thereafter, and social alienation from mainstream America also affected the group of new African Americans.

On slave plantations, those of African descent developed a new system of norms and values. They learned the appropriate place for stillness and movement. They endured forced labor and poor living conditions. The women often endured sexual

assault, resulting in the dilution of the lineage of African peoples and the emergence of a new group of mixed race individuals. On southern plantations, there began to be a racial hierarchy among those with African ancestry. Those who worked in the home versus those who worked in the fields were often selected based on whether they were products of the slave master's sexual improprieties. These mixed race individuals, often carrying a lighter hued skin color, were, in some cases, treated a bit better than other slaves and given less strenuous duties in the slave master's home. This would indeed be the first inkling of the intra-racial division that would create a skin color hierarchy within the African-American community and a condition that would subsequently coin the terms "house nigger" and "field nigger," both derogatory. These terms would eventually be used to describe African Americans who turned or were themselves turned from their African ancestry to seek accommodation from Europeans. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier asserts that the class of mixed blood children often created as a result of these mixed race unions suffered the effects of displacement twofold, and they often were not intending to stray from their "Africaness". Whether they were taken into the slave master's house as servants, or given separate living accommodations, or raised as white, they were so situated that family was an abstract and a sense of self was virtually nonexistent (Frazier 7). In short, their removal from a bond with the African American community was inevitable, but not always invited.

Prominent sociologist Andrew Billingsley gives perhaps the most notable observation of the results of this condition, stating, in sum, that slavery had a crippling

effect on the establishment, maintenance, and growth of normal patterns of family life among Africans who were brought to America as chattel. He points out that there were several factors in this process of family, community, social, and spiritual disintegration.

First, the family was torn apart at the very beginning of the slave trade. Second, there was a willful separation of men, women and children through inter-plantation sales. Thus family, community, and religious ties were lost. Third, there was no protection of marriage as an institution among slaves, as marriage of slaves required the consent of the slave master or owner. Consequently, there was mass exploitation of slave women by white owners and overseers for both pleasure and profit. Finally, and most notably, as a result of this rape and exploitation, the children that resulted from these situations were often separated from either their maternal or paternal families, and in some cases, they were driven from both because of their mixed race identity (Billingsley 68). This too gave the first inklings of what would be the ultimate feelings of isolation that mixed race individuals would feel within the African American community and the American community at large. Historian Brenda Stevenson further cites how the black family disintegrated:

> From the initiation of a romance, black men and women had to confront and compromise with their masters about control of their intimate lives, aware that their owner typically had the final say about if and when they could marry, and even who. Even after a slave's marriage, his or her master still commonly decided when slave husbands and wives could see each other, if and when they could live or work together, the fate of their children, and sometimes even the number of children they had. (226)

With this, the beginning of defining families specifically for the system of slavery began. With it would also eventually come a system for defining the race and place of those

individuals born of mixed heritage as a result of the nullification of respect for black families and the sexual exploitation of women of African descent. As the population of person's mixed with African and European blood grew, so did the seeming urgent need for some to contemplate where this group should fit into a society that enslaved individuals solely based on race. This need would eventually grow into a practice of determining the status of a child of mixed race ancestry by assigning them to one race. This would be determined occasionally based on the appearance of the child, but more often by assigning the child the racial status of the subsidiary parent. During this time, a mixed race individual was, more often than not, likely to have a mother who was a slave and a father who was a slave owner or slave master. This system would later manifest itself in the form of an unofficial law. In the interim, this new group of mixed race individuals had to learn their own survival techniques, as they lived between two different worlds, and they were often made to conform to whatever race was determined for them by others. They were neither black nor white, nor were they recognized fully by either group. However, on plantations, these individuals were often given special privileges, better living conditions, and subjectively, more acceptance by whites, as they were, often, the offspring of the plantation owner. Yet, they still remained slaves. This alienated them from pure Africans living on these plantations, yet they were not pure white either, so they were marginalized in that group too. Only two things could remove them from this gray area of mixed race duality- a pure Caucasian appearance and an owner or master who was willing to allow them to mask their African ancestry.

Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier supports Billingsley in his assertion that the class

of mixed blood children often created as a result of these unions suffered the effects of displacement twofold. Both Frazier and Historian Brenda Stevenson have observed how the life of the mixed race individual is complicated by displacement. Stevenson specifically notes:

> Often severed from their black or white mothers as small children, and not given the legal right of attachment to fathers who could not marry their mothers because of prohibitive interracial marriage laws, or would not do so for other reasons, many of these early. . . blacks [mulattos] emerged from their indentured lives without even the rudiments of a family. (259)

Many developed techniques to survive the displacement of family and to cope with the gray area in which they lived. Some of these individuals were often physically indistinguishable from a "pure" white person and used this condition to their advantages, sometimes escaping to the North individually or with the aide of others. In doing so, many of these mixed race individuals hid their racial background in order to live a life free from the terror of slavery:

> For those with the greatest nerve, or perhaps the greatest investment in their whiteness in Post Antebellum America and beyond, the possibility of altering one's race by passing [for another race] remained. Again, this involved great risk.(Gaudin 1)

After the abolition of slavery, "whiteness" became a thing of privilege in America- economically, socially, culturally, and systemically, and some mixed race individuals continued to hide their background even though slavery was no longer an issue. Persons of mixed race recognized that, in some cases, a white appearance was enough to earn them the rewards they wanted. However, in Post Antebellum America where family lineage was so important, more so than in contemporary America, "birth certificates. . . ,

induction papers, and baptism and marriage records required that one confirm their racial status. By obtaining these records and falsifying them (depending upon the definition of "colored" in a locale), some persons secured their status and the economic, political, and psychological amenities it promised" (Gaudin 1). In the end, a mixed race person passing for a particular race, namely European or white, personified a survival device at a time when the south, particularly, lagged behind the rest of the country in economic, educational, and health conditions as well as its willingness to accept non-Europeans fully into society. But even in the more forgiving north, those who were white had more job opportunities, were better educated, and sent their children to better schools, which prepared them for skilled or professional occupations, land ownership, and societal privilege. Those who were white or could pass for white enjoyed access to hospitals, guaranteeing better health care. Whiteness carried with it many other advantages, and persons who could slip across the ambiguous color line often did so to benefit themselves and their families. This condition of the racially mixed individual passing for white was eventually the topic of sociological studies. But sociologists were not the only individuals that began to examine the conditions and "passing" practices of some mixed race individuals.

During the latter portion of the nineteenth century writers such as Frances E. W. Harper began dealing with the phenomenon of passing in their works as a way of commenting on the complexities and inconsistencies of racial definitions in America. "Passing" is the term used in this study referring to mixed race persons who, by appearance, elect to live as white or who are visually recognized by others as white. White, for the sake of this discussion, will be defined as an individual with no identifiable

African ancestry and/or only traceable European blood. However, coupled with the rules and laws that were intended to establish one's race, early on, "passing" raised questions of the problematic ambiguity of racial definitions in American society. And it would create an individual who would sit at the center of this ambiguity, the mulatto, or as the individual would come to often be called, the "tragic mulatto". The tragic mulatto's story, although a real story that many individuals lived, would be fully considered only in the context of literary fiction for many years. Frances Harper's embattled protagonist, Iola Leroy, in the 1892 novel of the same name, conceivably, set a standard for the tragic mulatto figure in the literature of African Americans that followed the slave narrative and brought their condition in American society to the forefront. Although the context of the tragic mulatto has changed with time and place, the dilemma of these individuals is the same. These tragic individuals have existed and still exist in the margins of two communities, fitting into neither fully, accepted by neither completely, and always meeting a tragic end as a result. These persons often experienced inner turmoil as well as the social turmoil of fighting a war that American society waged against them by making them choose a race or forcibly choosing one for them through a system of racial definitions. In literary texts, including slave narratives, mixed race individuals were often idealistic figures and cultural types, and they were never looked upon as individuals. In life, it was much the same. However, it was not until the early twentieth century through the Harlem Renaissance, that perhaps, it became apparent that one of the most difficult situations in which to situate a person of mixed race was to attempt to definitively place him or her into a single racial ethnic group, whether it was in the fictitious backdrop of literary works or with actual persons who were living in

America and being affected by these conditions. This task of situating a person into one racial group became even more of a complexity because of a system of rules in America that weighed race, non-negotiably, upon one drop of blood.

The "one-drop rule" is an idiomatic term for the standard that says that a person with even one drop of non-white lineage should be classified as black, especially for the purposes of laws that once disallowed interracial marriage: "It should now be apparent that the definition of a black person as one with any trace at all of black African ancestry is inextricably woven into the history of the United States"(Davis 16). This rule caused the color line to be quickly, but imprecisely drawn in America. Immediately, whiteness was given privilege and color was viewed with disfavor.

It has already been established that when Africans first landed in America during slavery, the color issue and racial ambiguity began. White slave masters began diluting the African race with their illegitimate offspring almost immediately, creating a new mixed race in America. These offspring were often the result of forced sexual acts perpetuated by white slave masters upon helpless African slaves. These offspring were immediately placed in a gray area of society. This is also when various terms were coined to denote these persons with varying degrees of African ancestry or mixed race; these terms included mulatto for one-half black, quadroon for one-quarter black, octoroon for one-eighth black, and so on.

In post antebellum America, the one-drop rule further complicated the already ambiguous nature of race in America; however, the one-drop rule is still influential in the United States because of working American color criterion. Unconsciously or not, Americans visibly rely on skin color to identify the race of an individual, a practice that is

considerably inefficient. Usually, a multiracial person with visible black heritage is considered black unless he or she declares him or herself otherwise, identifying instead as white or mixed-race, for example. But rarely is the proclamation of "other" accepted if their physical features indicate any hint of blackness. Only those who look white are accepted as white by American standards. And persons of mixed heritage are often denied or ostracized if they try to claim their white heritage, even if their cultural upbringing is non-white.

By recognizing this social relationship of defining racial identity with the "one-drop rule," one can also understand the way in which the definitions of race in America used to describe and name race negatively affect persons of mixed racial heritage. In turn, however, one can then have a secure foundation for appraising the role of racial definitions in expressing cultural sentiments for these people, whether it is in life or literature. The connections and effect of these definitions on a person of mixed racial heritage is then direct and immediately apparent. This then forces the discussion that perhaps because of the American social constructs and definitions of race, there are many people who are unwillingly thrown into racial and cultural wars that they cannot escape. F. James Davis, in his work, Who Is Black: One Nation's Definition, contends:

> We have seen that applying the one-drop rule has resulted in defining, as black, a population that ranges all the way from unmixed African blacks to people who appear to be white. The rule thus produces ambiguities, strains, conflicts, and traumatic experiences-costs to society that weigh more heavily on the black community than on the white. (141)

Davis further notes that these rules have varying consequences:

> The different rules adopted in different societies and times to determine the status of a racially mixed population all cause problems of some kind, some of them more severe than others. The problems caused by the one-

> drop rule are complex, and some of them are painfully distressing, but the public level of concern about them has not been high because the rule is generally taken for granted in both the white and the black community. (141)

These ambiguities are recognized, not only by sociologists such as Davis, but by contemporary literary historians such as Gayle Wald as well. In the Preface to her work, Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture, Wald asserts:

> For me, part of the interest of narratives of racial passing lies precisely in their ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity, or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner. Yet in inquiring into how subjects have negotiated race, we cannot lose sight of the power of race to define. (ix)

Both Davis' and Wald's theories examine how the practice of passing for white or acknowledging whiteness, or blackness for that matter, became increasingly complex from the latter portion of the nineteenth century through the Harlem Renaissance, and it continues to be in the twenty-first century, both in the lives of and literature about, mixed race individuals.

Indeed, post-slave narrative texts such as Harper's Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted (1892), Charles Chesnutt's, The House Behind the Cedars (1900), Nella Larsen's Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929), James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1927), Wallace Thurman's, The Blacker the Berry (1929), and Jessie Faucet's Plum Bum (1929) are early literary examples containing themes concerning the results of racial definitions on individuals. Each text covers the complex subject in some way, but it is Nella Larsen's Quicksand (1928) and, her 1929 novel Passing that can be seen as the inheritors, perpetuators, and benchmarks of a long tradition of twentieth and

twenty-first century racial passing narratives. This is because there is something both interesting and unique to be examined with Larsen. First, Larsen not only wrote about mixed race ideologies and passing, but she, indeed, lived having faced the two as a mixed race individual herself. Second, Larsen's views about mixed race ideologies in America were not the same as most of her contemporaries. This placed Larsen's literature in a bit of a different context than her predecessors, even the "the light enough to pass" Chesnutt. But in what context?

Perhaps this curiousness was because it was during the period of the Harlem Renaissance and with Nella Larsen that it became apparent that the definition, role, and existence of the tragic mulatto was far more complex than preceding literature such as Chesnutt's had offered. It also became apparent during this time that some persons of mixed race disagreed with other African Americans on the basic concept of what is tragic about the mulatto. Is the mulatto tragic because he/she is half white, or is the mulatto tragic because he/she is half black? This question serves as a catalyst for a discussion on racial definitions in America and not only how they are received and interpreted in literature, but how they are received and interpreted by persons of these various backgrounds. Nella Larsen stands as a perfect model for such discussion.

Undeniably, Nella Larsen's novels Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) document the historical realities of the skin color issue in the greater American community and the social world of black America, but when considering Larsen and her works, one must also be reminded that there is also a judicious consideration of skin color and the issue of passing in Larsen's own life that must also be taken into account. One could accept that her concentration on mixed race characters in her works

indicates Larsen's view that there is an unmistakable favoring of whiteness in America and that mixed race persons are caught in a cavity of definitions, lineage, and choices, particularly the option to live as black or white if one's appearance affords it. Although Larsen's two novels deal significantly with privileging of the mixed race individual who can pass, she also explores the downfalls, negativity, and isolation that having to choose a race or choosing the wrong race brings. Quite frankly, Larsen did not feel one should have to choose. Larsen truly believed that the multiplicity of heritage should be acknowledged, but not defined by categories, far from the racial uplift sentiments being expressed by her literary counterparts.

Larsen's life and characters in her fiction even raise the issue of how one should not just be defined by skin color, but by cultural upbringing and ethnicity as well. She presents this issue in her works and forces this question in her own life by probing whether or not a mulatto is more prone to pass for white, or if many mulattos are simply passing for black if their cultural upbringing is, indeed, more Caucasian than African. One may speculate that this almost obsessive emphasis, yet uneasiness, concerning skin color in Larsen's life and the greater American community stems from Larsen's own experiences as a person of mixed race who came into contact with the privileges and downfalls of her black and white heritage or perhaps because of the compelling tragedies it sometimes brought to her life. Or was she self-loathing of her blackness? This study seeks to prove that in its totality, neither is entirely true of Larsen. Critic Zhou Yupei suggests:

> Until very recently, novels of passing that appeared during the Harlem Renaissance had been viewed as either assimilationist or collaborative with racist ideology. Mar Gallego's Passing Novels in the Harlem

> Renaissance offers an opposing view by providing a detailed account of the subversive and parodying strategies employed in novels by four representative and controversial African American writers. (1)

Among the writers Gallegos examines is Nella Larsen. It is the opinion of Yupei's study that Larsen falls not as an assimilationist or collaborative. Yupei contends that Gallegos's text considers Larsen and other authors' parodying strategies as responses, not only to social realities but to the idea of double consciousness and other social and literary traditions. Gallego is among the first to suggest about passing novels in the Harlem Renaissance that mixed race individuals and characters in literature do not always equal weakness, tragedy, or absolute ideologies. They can represent insight and the power to confront the notion of defining race at all. Further, they represent the idea that the term "race" itself is an imperfect concept.

In this context, the life and literary legacy of Nella Larsen (1891-1964), according to any measure, is a story of an unusually complex and mysterious woman of mixed race. She was born Nellie Walker to a Dutch mother Marie Hansen and Peter Walker, a black West Indian. She spent time visiting Dutch relatives in Europe as a young child and experienced racial as well as cultural duality early on. Her life was further complicated because after her father's death and her mother's remarriage to a white man, she was eventually the only one left in her immediate family who was not identifiably white by sight, subsequently forcing her into a world where she was not entirely accepted by the black community in America because of her physical removal from it culturally, and she was many times rejected by the white community in which she was raised, presumably even by some of her own family because of the visible manifestation of her black blood in her appearance. Upon birth, Nella inherited a cultural legacy that would be both

problematic and beneficial throughout her life; she was a racially mixed woman, or mulatto. However, she never considered herself tragic, although many others eventually would. In fact, a handful of literary historians have attempted to trace Larsen's legacy as a mulatto, and the texts have been poles apart in their interpretations and findings of her life. For the purpose of this study, the findings in the recently published George Hutchinson book, In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line, will be accepted as the most accurate account of Larsen's life, although other texts, such as the 1994 Larsen biography, Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance by Thadious Davis, and Charles Larsen's, Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen, will be considered.

Although it is common knowledge that biographical information about Larsen is limited, there are things that are historically available about her past that can lead to fair assumptions about her. In his text, George Hutchinson accepts that Nella's father Peter Walker died when she was young and her mother remarried a white man named Peter Larsen, who gave her a new name. Biographer Davis, in Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, speculates that Larsen's father never died during those early years at all but rather that Peter Larsen was simply Peter Walker reinventing himself as a white man, but there is absolutely no evidence of this, and George Hutchinson and the findings of this study definitively disagree with this theory. In fact, it is safe to say that Peter Walker and Peter Larsen are two different people according to vital records that are available. At any rate, a few years after Marie and the new Peter were together, Nella's sister was born. Little else is known about her childhood. And as an adult, Larsen was

extremely elusive whenever the discussion of her background arose. In some situations, she emphasized her Dutch heritage; in other situations, she was distant in discussing any part of her past, but at some point, Larsen did leave her family. Some speculate it was due to the pain of growing up as the only one in her family who was not white or could visibly pass for white. While others, like Davis, theorized that the light-skinned Peter Walker crossed the racial line to pass as the white Peter Larsen, and Nella Larsen remained silent to protect her father's secret. Again, there is no evidence of this. What is apparent is that Nella was the only one in the house who did not "look" white, and perhaps she left willingly to protect her family. Her mother's other daughter was, by all accounts, indeed white. Her mother was white, and Peter Larsen was accepted as white, whether he was, indeed, white or not is immaterial. It is accepted that Larsen was sent to all-black Fisk University, an institution populated at the time largely by children of parents from the black bourgeoisie, often of mixed race like Larsen. Leaving Fisk after a year, she then moved to Denmark for three years, staying with her mother's relatives.

Larsen eventually found her way to Harlem during the Renaissance where she socialized with black authors such as Jessie Redmon Fauset, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and white patrons such as Carl Van Vechten. She, in fact, was one of the few who supported the white Van Vechten after his publication of the controversial Nigger Heaven in 1926. In 1929, she dedicated her second novel, Passing, to Van Vechten and his wife, an act that was not well-received by African American Renaissance writers, a situation that led many to question her loyalty to race and demonstrated her refusal to conform to race ideologies. She married a physicist by the name of Elmer Imes and became a socialite in the African American

community, but she never felt as if she fit into the world of the black bourgeoisie. Other authors called her dismissive, and some even ventured to say that she was arrogant, but she refused to choose a single racial identity. She defied traditional conventions in her depiction of mixed race characters in her work, and she was not particularly a racial uplift author. She and Zora Neale Hurston quarreled, as Hurston had particular views about race while Larsen felt that being mulatto was not tragic for the traditional reasons Hurston cited.

Larsen and Imes eventually separated after his affair with a white woman, and in the midst of a bitter divorce, she was anonymously accused of plagiarism. She responded defending herself in a written statement, but it was the doom of her career, and she slowly began to fade into obscurity. Assumingly accepting of her inevitable fate, she started a rumor that she was moving to South America, but she instead headed back to Denmark, then back to the U.S. where she worked in New York in her trade profession as a nurse until she was found, in 1964, dead in her apartment in New York. Her sister, the only surviving member of her immediate family, denied knowing her at her death and refused to claim her body or attend her funeral.

During her lifetime, Larsen's works were widely hailed in the grand scheme of the Harlem Renaissance. She enjoyed a popular, but not considerable reputation as an author. However, despite the relative acknowledgement of her fiction and the impact of her views, Larsen failed to attract more than superficial critical attention during the time that she actively wrote, and the plagiarism accusation late in her career ultimately lessened that. Her writings were largely relegated to the category of Harlem Renaissance woman unworthy of much serious criticism after the 1940s. While some critics have

attempted to correct this, the perception of Larsen as a subordinate to Zora Neale Hurston, the appointed matriarch of the Harlem Renaissance, endures. More recently, however, a few critics and literary historians have begun to reconsider the merits of Larsen's life and works considered as a union, and some have begun to explore her legacy as a mulatto who refused to be tragic, and a writer who refused to conform to accepted standards. Her writings, once valued more for their historical significance to the Renaissance than their literary and biographical merit, are now seriously being reconsidered, with Hutchinson's study at the forefront.

Although literature about racial definitions such as Larsen's and interpretations of race is growing at a rapid and encouraging rate in the twenty-first century, there is still a culture of stereotyping, secrecy, and uncertainty around racial duality and racial passing. Perhaps this is why critics would rather deal with the works of fiction dealing with passing, rather than the realities of those authors who have experienced the culture of passing first hand and relay their actual feelings, whether politically and socially acceptable or not. Perhaps this is why critics have readily looked at the issue of passing in the fiction writings of Renaissance author Nella Larsen but have not comprehensively explored the realities of what skin color meant to her as an individual and other individual mixed race authors of the time. It is unfortunate because in the case of Larsen, the two are not mutually exclusive. One cannot divorce a discussion of the two from each other. Even further, as critic Catherine Rottenberg points out:

> Many analyses have attempted to determine whether or not Larsen's use of passing can be seen as a subversive strategy, that is, whether the narrative serves to reinforce hegemonic norms of race or whether it ultimately posits passing as a viable survival strategy, which has the potential to disrupt 'the enclosures of a unitary identity.' (1)

Rottenberg further speculates:

> While this question still informs several critiques, in the past few years commentators have been concentrating more and more on how passing interrogates and problematizes the ontology of identity categories and their construction. Rather than trying to place passing in a subversive/recuperative binary, these articles and books use passing as a point of entry into questions of identity and identity categories more generally. (1)

This is not to say that critics have not always been attuned to representations of race, skin color, and class in literary texts, but usually these elements are discussed with subtleties, and often, they are never connected tightly to the actual persons experiencing these dramas in their own lives such as with the slave narratives of old. Novels about passing existed both before and after Larsen. Fannie Hurst's Imitation of Life (1933) dealt with passing, but Hurst herself was a Jewish, Columbia-educated white woman, who ironically was a patron of Zora Neal Hurston and no doubt read Larsen's Quicksand and Passing which were published five and four years respectively prior to her work:

> Although scholars have often taken for granted and overestimated their similarity, white-authored representations of the tragic mulatto and African American representations of miscegenation and passing constitute profoundly different literary traditions. Of course, this does not mean that they do not share common elements, but rather that those elements have been put to distinctively different uses.(Fabi 3)

Even within the African-American literary community, mixed race representations varied. Passing for white was a phenomenon that once captivated black writers such as Jessie Fauset and Charles Chesnutt, whose works were previously mentioned. The mulatto was a firm character representation in many works, whether accurate or not. Several have written short critical studies about racial definitions, skin color hierarchy, and racial passing in American literature. And of course, the tragic

mulatto motif is a staple in American literature used by both black and white authors. George Hutchinson, however, has tried to break the cycle of dispensing with the correlation of the effects of societal norms on mixed race individuals in life and literature. For this reason, his 2006 text, In Search of Nella Larsen, will be considered as a companion for this study.

It is the specific intent of this study to maintain that Larsen's life as a mulatto reveals her true feelings about racial definitions, mixed race ideologies, the practice of passing, and challenges the traditional notion of the definition of passing and the representation of the mulatto figure in life and in literature, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance. Larsen, unlike most "tragic mulatto" figures who are lifelong victims of a self-hatred implanted when they were young and who are compelled to devote their lives to ridiculing themselves, did not pour out her bitterness or scorn upon the world, or the mulatto characters that she created in her works. For example, her 1929 offering, Passing, is not a novel worthy of note only for its concept of racial identity. It is a novel significant for its plea to acknowledge racial duality rather than choosing a single racial side. This concept is apparent in Larsen's own life. She refused to choose a racial side, neither defining herself as black or white and refusing to be an advocate for any racial side. Subsequently, this sentiment spilled over into her works. Therefore, one cannot divorce a discussion of the works of Nella Larsen from her life as a mixed race individual. Indeed, the caste system of skin color and the issue of passing accrue several layers of meaning when considering racial definitions in America, and the life and works of Nella Larsen. In fact, Larsen's beliefs about racial definitions, the tragic mulatto, and mixed race ideologies were very different from those of her

contemporaries, and those beliefs were, indeed, demonstrated in her life and works. This study will be organized to treat Larsen's life and career as a model for new ideologies in the study of literature of mixed race individuals in a modern critical literary context.

Chapter Two of this study establishes the importance of Larsen in context of time and place, illustrating the rise of a mulatto presence in America in the period directly preceding and early into the Harlem Renaissance. After examining her family heritage and early life, the text establishes her place in the socio-political context of the time. The chapter then concerns itself with the early formation of Larsen's views about race, skin color, and racial passing and how they compared to the ideals of others.

Chapter Three involves the specific years of the Renaissance as well as Nella Larsen's place in the literary development of the period. A discussion of the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940), and the racial, literary and cultural unions that shaped the community in which Larsen lived during the height of her success is necessary, but it is critical that the movement be defined not by what unified it, but what fed its contradictions. In doing so, the Chapter discusses Larsen's position as an isolated cultural model within the Harlem Renaissance literary community, as well as an isolated figure in the racial constructs of America.

Chapter Four breaks with chronology to focus on Larsen's writings, particularly her novels. These writings are analyzed by establishing the social context in which they were written and the biographical data concerning Larsen. The primary consideration will be given to Larsen's novel Passing (1929), but and her earlier offering, Quicksand (1928) will also be considered, as well as secondary works and biographies of other

mixed race Renaissance authors. These works are considered in conjunction with Larsen's philosophies and/or how they may have affected her works. Each documents the historical realities of the skin color issue in the greater American community and the social world of the black bourgeoisie that Larsen experienced. Concerning Quicksand and Passing specifically, the chapter will examine the novels' greatest appeal, which is not simply sociological, but psychosomatic. Larsen takes the theme of racial dualism or as some have referred to it, "double-consciousness", so popular in post antebellum and Harlem Renaissance fiction, to a higher and more complex level, displaying a complicated understanding, and insightful analysis of mixed race psychology. Who better to do such a thing than one who has experienced so many layers of this psychology in her own life? The task here is to fuse literary fiction themes with the social realities of the time.

Chapter Five presents the summary and conclusions derived from the study as well as suggestions for further research concerning Larsen, mixed-race ideologies, and Harlem Renaissance literature and culture.

CHAPTER II

The Life of Nella Larsen: History, Race, and Culture in America

The motivation for this study is the life of Nella Larsen and her most noted works, Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929). Both texts were, of course, motivated by mixed race ideologies of the Harlem Renaissance; however, it is important to note that the historical trends, events, and cultural background of America directly preceding the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the emergence of Nella Larsen's public persona as a mixed-race woman and author just as much. Where literature is concerned, the public perception of race was often translated into the texts of individuals, and these texts faced critical appraisals for their literary value as well as their social and cultural statements, and Larsen did not escape any layer of this criticism. M. Giulia Fabi, in the text Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel says, "The critical resistance to pre-Harlem Renaissance fiction traditionally coalesced around the treatment of all-but-white characters and specially around what was perceived as their prominence at the expense of visibly black folk characters" (Fabi 2). These grounds are the reasons that this study began by focusing on the matters of race, identity, miscegenation, and racial passing to outline a historical and literary history of pre-Harlem Renaissance literature and culture that will serve to foreshadow the complexity in the development of authors as individuals in America and the value of their texts during the Renaissance, particularly those texts

dealing with mixed race ideologies:

> In early African American fiction, the passer (i.e., a mulatto or mulatta so light skinned as to be able to pass for white) gave literary immediacy and visibility to several crucial issues: the cruelty and immorality of slavery, the hypocrisy of dehumanizing blacks while forcible consorting with them sexually, and the potential crossing over of racial distinctions and hierarchies supposed to be natural and therefore immutable. (Fabi 5)

Fabi further notes that, " The passer, whose body is marked by whiteness and disguises a mixed genealogy, enabled early African American writers to question whiteness as 'unmarked category' (Haraway 188), as the invisible standard to racialize others" (Fabi 5).

In addition:

> In pre-Harlem Renaissance African American fiction the representation of the passer's peculiar status is aimed at drawing attention to the fixity and constrictiveness of the racialized black and white subject positions between which he or she has to choose rather than to the fluidity of personal identity or the pleasures of" being able to move between two worlds. (Fabi 5)

Upon examination of Nella Larsen's life, specifically, one finds that Larsen's embattled public literary personality and the characters created in her novels did not differ greatly from her troubled private persona as one struggling with her mixed race heritage, inability to pass for white, and her flawed acclimation into the black community. In fact, there were distinct turning points in Larsen's private life that moved her development as an individual and as an emerging figure of the Harlem Renaissance forward significantly. Each of these elements about Larsen can be seen by examining her early life and the social constructs of race in America that existed during this time. Indeed, the importance of Larsen in context of time and place also illustrates the impact of being a mulatto on her ideologies concerning race and racial definitions that appear in

her works and her criticism of fellow African-American writers and the culture of African Americans in America dealing with mixed race ideologies.

It can be accepted that Harlem Renaissance literature considered as a group or genre is of great historical as well as literary value because it was dominated by several historically relevant themes. The customs, values and problems of blacks and the malevolence and discrimination imparted on them by whites were, of course, of major concern and the focus of many texts. The second major theme concerned the adjustments that blacks needed to make in order to make their existing conditions better despite the inequity that the "color line" created. In fact, the historical value of literature of the period and its emphasis on social and historical contexts and its rebelliousness defines the era, so much so that a study of the literary is incomplete without a companion study of the historical. Equally, a study of an individual's works during this time would also be incomplete without a complimentary discussion of how that author was influenced by the times personally. Hence, it is only through an examination of Larsen's family heritage and her place in the socio-political context of the time that one can fully understand her subsequent views about mixed race ideologies, the "color line" and racial passing and how they manifested themselves in her literary efforts.

Nella Larsen's early family life and racial heritage played an important role in how her ideologies about race and racial definitions in America would emerge in her adult life as a writer. In his biography, In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line, George Hutchinson demonstrates that the price of a mulatto as an individual was costly during the early part of the twentieth century through the Harlem Renaissance,

both publicly and privately. This cost was and is, at times, heartbreaking and unfortunate, but a necessary evil in the struggle for one's understanding of self. As in the rise of most public figures, there is always a personal sacrifice to be endured. Nella Larsen's life was no different. She was not just a symbol of the mulatto of resistance and defiance. Larsen was a wife, a woman, and, quite simply, a human being. Indeed, Larsen's identity as an ordinary woman whose early private life placed her in extraordinary circumstances is one of the most tragic and deeply relevant revelations of Hutchinson's biography. This, Hutchinson looms over in the text just as meticulously as he does Larsen's involvement in the Harlem Renaissance literary community. In fact, the private dramas of Larsen's early life are intricately intertwined to represent a new discourse of political and personal consciousness that few biographies or texts about mixed race individuals have successfully accomplished. Specifically, Hutchinson was successful in detailing Nella Larsen's evolution as a mixed race woman living in America and the turning points in her early life that helped in the development of her total self.

Larsen's evolution as a mixed race woman was defining. Her life, according to any measure, is a story of an unusually torn woman born in the late nineteenth century, and who came of age in twentieth century America. Ironically, it is this cultural and historical period that was, indeed, the identifying factor that was crucial in the development of Larsen's character. And during this period, race and the color of one's skin was a significant part of the social landscape. Cedric Herring notes that the role of skin color in America dates back to colonialization:

> For the most part, it has been overshadowed by or subsumed within more general issues of racism and race relations. Nevertheless, skin tone, per se, has historically played a significant role in determining the life chances of African Americans and other people of color. The legacy of colonialism, racial oppression during slavery, legalized discrimination in the Jim Crow era, and de facto segregation in the post-civil rights era have all functioned to create and perpetuate skin color stratification in communities. (Herring 1-2)

When Nella Larsen, originally Nellie Walker, was born in 1891, it is common knowledge that for African Americans, it was a time of turbulence and change for which the family provided a haven of stability, communally, economically and spiritually, from the ills and implications of the racial stratification issues of America. Indeed, the disintegration of the family, based on race had been so much a part of America's history, that people began to recognize that the family unit was one of the strongest social units of society. Historical studies have shown that the basic social group, united through bonds of kinship or marriage in all societies, has been disrupted most in peoples native of Africa in America. With increased racism, America was experiencing an era full of violence, prejudice, sexism, classism, and racism. Women of color, in particular, were faced with all elements of discrimination. With both gender and color working against them in society, women of color, particularly African-American women generated a tremendous amount of strength to survive, much of which originated in the family unit. Through the experiences of dismantlement in the family, by death and slavery, many African-American women applied their strength to aid in other areas of their lives. However, Larsen's life evolved from dual oppression as a mixed race individual, an oppression that ironically did not give her a relentless drive to fight and encourage racial solidarity, but to simply try to live without race being a factor. So, in 1891, when Nellie Walker was born

in Chicago, Illinois, she needed a strong family unit to overcome the flawed racial constructs of America; unfortunately, it appears that this may not have been the case. Larsen's family would be broken rather than strengthened by race matters, and Nella would, unfortunately, bear most of the resulting pain.

It is widely accepted that Larsen was born to a white mother, Mary Hansen, who was of Dutch descent and classified as white in America, and a West Indian father, Peter Walker, who was classified as black. In his biography, Hutchinson speculates:

> If Nella's mother had arrived only recently in the United States when she took up with Peter, it is easy to believe their relationship owed something to his familiarity with the Danish tongue. That he was "colored" and she "white" would not have seemed the obstacle most "native" Americans considered it. In the Danish West Indies- St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix- which would not be sold to the United States until 1917, racial classifications differed dramatically from those in the United States. It was illegal in the Danish West Indies to designate a person's race on official forms such as census and church records. In the informal realm of everyday life, the "Negro" designation applied only to lower-class and so-called "full-blooded Negroes." (19)

Hutchinson also notes that the designation of the word "Negro" in Danish culture only applied to those blacks of the lower class and that one could, indeed, be classified as white because of his or her social position. Therefore, both Mary and Peter may not have considered Peter a "Negro" and didn't fully comprehend what that designation meant by American racial definitions and standards. Hutchinson theorizes this by saying that "Native-born [American] whites were all too aware of the costs of crossing the line" (Hutchinson 20). Nevertheless, it is almost certain that Mary and Peter quickly found out about and had to adapt to the manner in which America defined race and how they viewed an inter-racial couple. The act of race mixing, here, was seen as a threat to

European racial purity and thus a threat to European colonial rule and tyrannical social order. By this time, Nellie Walker had already been conceived, and would find herself born to a union in which America despised, so much so that in places there were laws to forbid it. A white woman and a black man joined in marriage would be known as miscegenation, and children born to this union would bear the name, mulatto. "The realm of law was one of the few venues in which such private relationships became public. Miscegenation law and jurisprudence offer a unique, if somewhat problematic, view of a whole constellation of ideas. . ." (Brattain 1). And so, in 1891, Nellie Walker, the mulatto, was born.

Eva Saks has argued and Michelle Brattain noted in her article, "Miscegenation and Competing Definitions of Race in Twentieth-Century Louisiana", "Miscegenation law consisted of an evolving, self-referential body of ideas and actions that acquired a power of its own, enabling it to create and sustain ideas such as the notion that race is, and resides in, blood"(1). It is indeed because of this set of rules that Nellie Walker, visibly the product of a mixed race relationship and unable to pass for white from the time she entered the world, would be torn by how society classified her race and her actual cultural upbringing.

Although little is known about her childhood, it can be assumed that a mixed race child growing up in Chicago, Illinois probably experienced some difficulties, not just because of her race but because of the rapidly changing racial and industrial environment of Chicago: "By 1890, mainly because of the city's annexation of numerous suburbs, Chicago's population had surpassed 1 million" (Cozen). In 1891, Chicago's first railway

went into operation to begin the loop that would encircle the city's downtown area. In addition, Chicago's first skyscraper was built, both positive changes for the city. But at the same time, the death rate from typhoid was reaching large numbers, and illness and disease resulting from water polluted by human waste brought about a state of emergency in the city. On a positive social note, Chicago's Provident Hospital, the country's first interracial hospital was thriving under the leadership of black surgeon Daniel Hale Williams. The hospital housed the first medical training school for black women. And of course, in 1893, Dr. Williams performed the world's first open-heart surgery. Despite this seeming development and inclusionary environment, the racial environment of Chicago was not ideal, and Nellie and her multiracial and cultural family would have most obviously been exposed to this reality. After all, racial segregation in parts of the country was still very much prevalent, as were laws separating people according to their racial identities. The mixed race person, particular those individuals who visually, like Nellie, looked mixed, were caught in a great dilemma, unable to pass for either white or black. Stereotypes associated with mixed race individuals came together in a character type, known in America as the tragic mulatto. The tragic mulatto figure was most predominant in mid-nineteenth century literature, as it was represented in key works of sentimental fiction. The tragic mulatto figure located itself instead at the intersection of race and national racial identity. Its use in fiction flourished at the precise moment when the definition of American identity and the meaning of racial identity were at once in crisis. The figure was seen as the primary cultural model where the prospect of a viable multi-racial community could be contested in America. Examining some of the earliest

works to feature the tragic mulatto, including novels by Lydia Maria Child, William Wells Brown's, Clotel (1853), Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), and Harriet Wilson's, Our Nig (1859), one can suggest that there was and remains an implicit anxiety about miscegenation in the construction of racial identification in the tradition of American literature.

Though the tragic mulatto has been discussed primarily in terms of African-American literature, this character type existed in real life, and, indeed, such was the case with Larsen. This character type included the relentless search for identity, exotic looks resulting from racial mixture, the lack of a clear cultural or ethnic connection, tragic marginality in society, and an often dysfunctional or broken family. Unfortunately, Nellie would at some point in her life fit each of these descriptions, but she would also have to adjust to them. Thus, it is important that one examines the process in which an individual goes through in the dismantling of identity when it comes to racial binaries in America. If nothing else, it extends our historical understanding of the cultural landscape of America. Moreover, given the demographic change the United States population is now undergoing, it is clear that racial identity in America must necessarily be defined increasingly by its very multi-racial makeup rather than outside of it.

F. James Davis observes that mulattoes, particularly of lighter complexion, adjust to their marginality in society in diverse ways. Two of which are relevant to Larsen. Davis says of mulattoes:

> They may accept and make use of the marginal status position, adopting a marginal identity rather than a black identity, perceiving and dealing objectively with the black and the white communities both while not being

> fully a part of either, and often being a liaison person between the two. (Davis 150)

Or they may "suppress the dilemma and reject any kind of racial identity, focusing instead on a professional identity or some other absorbing role" (Davis 150). Larsen unfortunately tried and failed in both roles. Unable to pass for white, Larsen could not escape her racial duality.

Not long after Nellie was born, her father, Peter Walker, became no longer a part of the lives of Mary and their daughter: "About Nellie Walker's father we know painfully little beyond what the birth certificate tells us and what the adult Nella Larsen said about him" (Hutchinson 19). What is known is that shortly after Peter Walker left Nellie's life, for whatever reason, her mother married the white Peter Larson, from whom Nellie took her surname and eventually changed her first name to Nella. Specific research indicates why childhood may not have been pleasant for Nella. George Hutchinson observes:

> Children of interracial couples often did not suffer if their father held a high position in the African American community and the family remained intact with him firmly at the head of it but for mulatto children of the working class and questionable origins, the situation throughout the late nineteenth century and most of the twentieth was different, especially if the black father was not present. (21)

Hutchinson continues by noting that:

> Lower-class white women with mixed children were routinely assumed to be prostitutes. A white mother in this position could expect vicious calumny from whites, and little better treatment from most blacks, if they would have anything to do with her at all. (21)

This is the condition Nella's newly formed "white" family inherited because of her presence. Unable to pass and visually fit into her family since the only other person visibly of color was no longer present, Larsen's struggles began.

There are indications that Nella Larsen lived several years as a child with her mother's relatives in Denmark rather than with her mother, stepfather, and eventually their newly born daughter, Nella's half sister. Perhaps to ease some of the racial positions placed on the family by America, they sent Nella away. However, at some point she did return to Chicago and attended the public schools there before Peter Larson enrolled her in Fisk University's Normal School, in 1907, an event that marked the beginning of her permanent separation from her "white" family.

It was perhaps thought that the institution in Nashville, Tennessee, would suit Nella because of its history. From its earliest days in the 1800s, Fisk played a leadership position in the education of African-Americans. Fisk teachers were among America's academic, creative, and community leaders since the school's beginnings. Among them were such figures as W.E.B. Du Bois, who graduated from Fisk, in 1888, and the great social critic and co-founder of the NAACP. Booker T. Washington and James Weldon Johnson were among several Fisk faculty members who eventually became major figures in the period directly preceding and through the height of the Harlem Renaissance. But during the time of Larsen's matriculation at Fisk, blacks in Tennessee were also enjoying a cultural renaissance of sorts. Between 1898 and 1915, several black publishing/printing companies released books and essays to advance the ideologies of black civil rights, including Fisk University, which started its own university press. So it is arguable that no single institution, at the time, would have played such a crucial role as Fisk in the shaping

of Nella Larsen in her learning and acclimation to black culture in America. George Hutchinson perhaps best explains the decision to send Nella to Fisk in his text. He first indicates that the family probably thought that their make-up as predominately white and the racial environment of Chicago could not coexist. In addition, the presence of a black child may, indeed, hinder, Anna, Nella's sister's chances of being accepted in a white world:

> Their new neighborhood, Englewood, was all white and hostile to blacks, and Anna was fifteen, old enough for a working-class girl in those days to begin worrying about marriage prospects. Besides, Nellie[a] had nothing to gain by staying with them. It was time for her to find her place in the Negro world to which they would never belong.(51-52)

So, Larsen left for Fisk, but her time with her family in Chicago and abroad would prove to have left a huge imprint on her view of race and identity. She had developed what can be assumed as a fear of abandonment because of her race that she would never be able to overcome. Hutchinson says:

> Keenly sensitive to the stigma of blackness, on the one hand, and that of presumed illegitimacy on the other, she adopted a protective mask of diffidence and intense self-restraint... To what "group," after all, had Nellie Larsen ever really belonged? Hadn't groups always spelled trouble for her, inhabiting as she did the bristling borders along which they faced off? But maybe Fisk would be different. There, sheltered by Jubilee Hall and surrounded by African Americans-her "people," as fate would have it-perhaps the dark daughter would come into her own. (52)

Unfortunately, this too would be a disappointment for Larsen. She did not stay at the institution very long. George Hutchinson speculates that she was perhaps expelled for some violation of Fisk's very strict dress or conduct codes, but the definitive reason is unknown. Perhaps a better explanation is the fact that Larsen felt alienated in a

predominantly black American world, after having a childhood so culturally multi-dimensional. Sushama Austin speculates that:

> Moving from an environment where she was the only "black" in her family to one in which she was not, was as much a shock as a blessing. Situated among the black elite, Larsen must have felt a different type of racial distance. At Fisk, Larsen would be inundated with black role models and race issues. At this point, her own race issues would surface. It was a time where she was obligated to face and confront these questions. Race issues coupled with adolescent concerns further exaggerate the situation. (3)

Perhaps Nella, the mulatto, was again forced to confront the fact that she was different, not just racially, but culturally as well. Whatever the case, what is known is that after leaving Fisk, she then spent four years in Denmark, presumably with her mother's relatives, before returning to the United States. In Denmark, of course, far from the United States, Nella would experience a more liberal acceptance of her mixed-race background. But she would, nonetheless, eventually return to the United States. Regrettably, Davis's assertion that, "For the majority of the lighter mulattoes, it appears, the constant reinforcement of the American definition of black by both the white and the black community provides a basis for a clear sense of group identity" did not fit Larsen (Davis 150). She did not feel a sense of group identity, not while at Fisk, not while abroad, and certainly not after her return to America.

Between 1912 and 1915, a few years after leaving Fisk and returning from Denmark, Larsen trained as a nurse in New York and, upon her graduation, she traveled to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to work as head nurse at John Andrew Memorial Hospital and Nurse Training School. Here, she met Elmer Imes, a physics professor. By

1916, however, Larsen returned to New York and took a nursing post there. Here, she and Elmer Imes would reunite and subsequently marry in 1919. Thadius Davis says that Larsen considered her marriage to Imes, "a move upward in society" 127). Imes was greatly respected in the black community, but also in his field of physics. He was only the second African American to earn a doctorate in physics. His dissertation broke new scientific ground, presenting a new form of research, that fundamentally changed quantum theory. Imes, who completed a Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, was one of the leading members of the elite black bourgeoisie, and a marriage to him promised Larsen "entry into a privileged African American world" (Davis 124). Imes, a social butterfly and prominent in his career, introduced Nella to the black bourgeoisie of New York, composed predominantly of mixed-race individuals, and educated or financially prosperous blacks. Here, she would find a group of mixed race individuals who were preoccupied with expressing the fact that they, indeed, had white heritage that needed to be acknowledged, or those that wanted to identify neither with black or white society, only with those they felt were of their kind, and their kind was generally classified as mixed-race individuals whose skin was lighter as a result of their mixed heritage. This group sat in the middle of the racial divide in America. Among the bourgeoisie's most prominent institutions was the social club, in which Imes was well-acclimated. These clubs strived for a social correctness that mirrored that of its downtown Manhattan white equivalents. The formal winter season began on Thanksgiving eve and ran until the beginning of Lent. Larsen and Imes were mainstays at most of these events. Sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier, W.E.B. Dubois, and author Anna Julia Cooper had shown

that skin color was a predictor in education, occupation, and income levels, and generally, those with a lighter toned skin were consistently provided higher status in America as opposed to those with darker skin. E. Franklin Frazier coined the term "la bourgeoisie noire" to describe this section of Harlem social life. These were the people who managed to get away from working in the kitchens of whites and other roles as caretakers and maids of the white population. On the whole, these upper class families embraced a conformist taste and a innate sense of respectability and family lineage. So willingly or not, Nella Larsen was thrust into this life of "black" privilege that would also prove to be one of isolation as well.

In this new experience, and around these new people, Nella would still stand out. She was intentionally mysterious about her upbringing, which for the black bourgeoisie was problematic, as family history was important in this circle of society. But this, of course, relates a significant feature of Larsen's ambivalent relationship to her deeply conflicted personal and cultural history. The obvious personal and social denial at work in these sorts of situations reminds one of the disquieting similarities to the general treatment of racial matters in Larsen's later works. Although during this time, it is apparent that Larsen never really publicly acknowledged her background, she would later persistently create fictional figures in her works whose lives were made problematic by racial and social contradictions similar to those present within her own family. The issue of Larsen's disquieting silence is part of her racially conflicted life where she would always, in one way or another, deny, doubt, or hide her family origin. She did this for fear that disclosure of her heritage would lead to persecution or rejection.

Paradoxically, her attempts to save herself from others somewhat caused of the destruction of herself at the same time.

Concurrently, at the same time of her introduction to the black bourgeoisie, Nella began to mix with literary and artistic types, bohemian whites, patrons of the arts, and those who were self-proclaimed to be blind of race and race matters, a group that seemed abundant in New York. In 1921, she resigned from her post with the New York City Department of Health and took a job with the New York Public Library. Encouraged by colleagues, she received her librarian's license. It was there that she also began her acquaintances with people influential in the burgeoning arts movement beginning in Harlem and that would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance. She became close to Walter White, Jessie Fauset, and perhaps the person who would become her greatest champion, Carl Van Vechten, a well-known white patron of black writers during the Harlem Renaissance. Larsen was intrigued by White, who was mixed race, blonde and blue-eyed, and able to pass for white, but chose not to. He was a spokesman for blacks for a great deal of his life, and he would eventually become the executive secretary of the NAACP. Jessie Fauset became close to Larsen perhaps because of their similar views about the complexity of skin color and racial definitions in America. And Carl Van Vechten was an unlikely mentor to Larsen.

Carl Van Vechten, himself, was a writer, photographer, and eventually the literary executer of Gertrude Stein. But Van Vechten was most interested in black writers of the Renaissance, and he knew and promoted the likes of Richard Wright, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and of course, he would eventually become Larsen's champion.

Indeed, other African-American writers took an interest in her, but those relationships would change; some would become embittered, some friendlier, but none would last. Nella, although gaining a smooth entry into Harlem, would find hardships fitting in, here, as well. Although a mulatto, Nella had the cultural background of her maternal family that would still set her apart from others that she encountered. Her philosophy to stray from racial uplift movements, and her unconcerned, sometimes seemingly snobbish demeanor towards other blacks, and sometimes whites was marginalizing. The cause of most of this inner and outer conflict was the "color line", this symbolic line that individuals of different races must cross in order to accept each other. Critic W. E. B. Du Bois became one of the major voices of this new attitude when he first stated plainly the conflict that was to define much of the twentieth century in his book, The Souls of Black Folk: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line- the relation of the darker races to the lighter races of men..." (Du Bois).

Acceptance was an ideal goal for most individuals with African American heritage during the time, just as the color line was an insurmountable obstacle in the society where the color line existed and in which Larsen grew. The lack of ability for a mulatto like Larsen to sometimes determine on which side of the line he or she belonged dominated the blueprint of action in his or her life, and this would be so of Nella Larsen as she navigated her way through Harlem, sometimes to her fortune, but often to her detriment. Nella, in another phase in her life, would again be faced with some form of rejection in her society and in her immediate family. Indeed, New York would deem yet another challenge to Nella Larsen, the mulatto.

CHAPTER III

Race and Passing in Literature and Culture: Nella Larsen and the Harlem Renaissance

It is in New York that one can see that, as a writer, Larsen had an evolution. After her marriage to Imes, and a little over two years after she arrived in New York again, a change was brewing in the city. It was, indeed, a Renaissance:

> Variously known as the New Negro movement, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Negro Renaissance, the movement emerged toward the end of World War I in 1918, blossomed in the mid- to late 1920s, and then faded in the mid-1930s. The Harlem Renaissance marked the first time that mainstream publishers and critics took African American literature seriously and that African American literature and arts attracted significant attention from the nation at large. (Winz 1)

Nella and Elmer Imes became very much a part of this environment. A black middle-class had developed advanced by an improved education and employment opportunities following the American Civil War. And, of course, Nella and Elmer were a product of this boom: following the American Civil War. And, of course, Nella and Elmer were a product of this boom:

> During a phenomenon known as the Great Migration, hundreds of thousands of black Americans moved from an economically depressed rural South to industrial cities of the North to take advantage of the employment opportunities created by World War I. As more and more educated and socially conscious blacks settled in New York's neighborhood of Harlem, it developed into the political and cultural center of black America. Equally important, during the 1910s a new political agenda advocating racial equality arose in the African

> American community, particularly in its growing middle class. Championing the agenda were black historian and sociologist W.E.B. Dubois and the NAACP, which was founded in 1909 to advance the rights of blacks. This agenda was also reflected in the efforts of Jamaican-born Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey, whose "Back to Africa" movement inspired racial pride among blacks in the United States. (Winz 1)

African-American literature and arts had begun a steady development just before the turn of the century, an interest that Nella had been quietly pursuing, but now had the chance to take advantage of seriously. She witnessed black musical theater emerging, jazz and blues music taken from black residents from the South and Midwest and emerging in the bars and nightspots of Harlem: "The first stirrings of black literary activity that would foreshadow the Harlem Renaissance were evident in the years immediately before and shortly after World War I" (Wintz 64). It was at this time that several black writers published work that differed from the existing literature of Charles Chesnutt and early Paul L. Dunbar: "These writers came from extremely diverse backgrounds and worked independently of one another in widely scattered areas of the country" (64). Similar to Chestnutt and Dunbar, these new writers published their first works in non-black publications and often were financed by white patrons. Sometimes referred to as "Negrotarians", these white patrons had only their color in common, since their reasons for involvement ranged from social interest, to economic conquests, to a sincere belief that blacks were victims of civil rights abuses to an interest in recruiting blacks for revolutionary political purposes. By the 1920s, most of these writers, their white patrons, along side emerging literary talent, would gravitate to Harlem and be known as the founders of the Harlem literary movement, or the Harlem Renaissance:

> The first of the new writers to publish was James Weldon Johnson. Johnson is especially important because, more than any other writer, he was a transitional figure whose early work was in the Dunbar tradition but who later became a significant poet and critic of the Harlem Renaissance. Chronologically Johnson, who was born in 1871, belonged to the generation of Dunbar and Chesnutt, and his first published work, a dialect piece patterned after Dunbar's popular poetry, was accepted in 1899 for publication. (Wintz 64)

Indeed, the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the fiction of Charles Chestnut were early milestones for what would legitimize black literature during the Renaissance, but by the end of World War I the poetry of Claude McKay and literature of Langston Hughes foreshadowed the type of literature that would follow in the 1920s by describing the reality of black life in America and the struggle for racial identity. At the time, the growing African-American social concern was dominated by several things, the first being the customs and problems of southern blacks. The most pressing of these problems was the cruelty and injustice of lynching. The second major area of concern was the adjustments that blacks needed to make after they left the South and migrated to cities in the North like New York. In the 1920s, three works signaled the new creative energy in African-American literature. McKay's volume of poetry Harlem Shadows (1922) became one of the first works by a black writer to be published by a mainstream, national publisher. Cane (1923), by Jean Toomer, was an experimental novel that combined poetry and prose in documenting the life of American blacks in the rural south and urban north. There Is Confusion (1924), the first novel by writer and editor Jessie Fauset, depicted middle-class life among black Americans from a woman's perspective. And of course, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1927) by James Weldon Johnson which recounts the life of a light-skinned black man who passes for white. This novel, in

which the protagonist feels guilty about passing is one of the first to more than topically grapple with the internal affects of passing on the individual, not just society. Each of these works and their authors would influence Nella, through their writing or their personal friendship.

With these early works as the foundation, several historical events in the early 1920s also helped launch the Harlem Renaissance and had a particular impact on Nella who began to, through her role as a black socialite and wife of a prominent black man, develop relationships with literary patrons, black artists, musicians and writers. First, on March 21, 1924, Charles S. Johnson of the National Urban League hosted a dinner to acknowledge the latest literary talent in the black community and to introduce several young African American writers to New York's white literary authorities. As a result of this dinner, The Survey Graphic, a magazine of social analysis and criticism that was interested in cultural pluralism, produced a Harlem issue in March 1925. Paul Kellogg, the white editor of the publication, lingered after the dinner to talk with Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, and others. Out of this conversation came the idea for a special black cultural issue of The Survey Graphic. Kellogg quickly offered Charles S. Johnson control of the issue. Devoted to defining the aesthetic of black literature and art, the Harlem issue featured work by black writers and was edited by black philosopher and literary scholar Alain Leroy Locke. Locke was a historian, educator, writer, and philosopher, who would subsequently become known as a leader and most important interpreter of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Locke would come to guide artistic activities and advance the recognition and respect of African Americans. As a historian,

Locke studied African culture and traced its influences on Western culture. He recommended that black writers, painters, sculptors, actors, and musicians look to African sources for identity and to utilize these resources and methods for their work. He encouraged black authors to search for subjects in black life and to set high artistic standards for themselves. And, he familiarized American readers with the Harlem Renaissance when he edited The Survey Graphic. He subsequently would expand this text into The New Negro later that year, an anthology of fiction, poetry, drama, and essays.

The second event was the publication of Nigger Heaven (1926) by white novelist and literary patron to many African American writers, Carl Van Vechten. The book was a hugely talked about depiction of Harlem life. Although the book offended some members of the black community, its coverage of both the elite and the coarse side of Harlem helped create a trend that drew thousands of refined New Yorkers, both black and white, to Harlem's colorful and exciting culture. It also stimulated a national market for African American literature and music. But Nigger Heaven was not without its controversy. In fact, it is the controversy that fueled its popularity. With its representations of stereotypically conventional or simple black characters and pretentious black academics modeled after the Talented Tenth, Nigger Heaven divided the black literary community. Members of the Talented Tenth uniformly boycotted the book. For many, the book's title alone was enough to cause resentment. W.E.B. Du Bois and Countee Cullen were among those that publicly expressed outrage. Du Bois called it "a blow in the face" and "an affront to the hospitality of black folk and the intelligence of

white." Not simply offended by the use of "nigger" in its title, many like Du Bois were fearful that the portrayal of African Americans in what they perceived as the crudest of stereotypes would only continue to support racial biases. Their response underscored their convictions about the role of literature in African American life-namely, that literature by the about blacks should serve primarily as propaganda. This meant that works of artistic value should be untainted by stereotypes and embarrassing vulgarities and dialect. They believed that too much blackness, too much street culture, and too much folklore would weaken blacks' ability to acquire respect and equality in the dominant white culture. For them, art was meant to teach whites about blacks and to convince them of the enduring value and civility of African American culture. Their disappointment at the publication of Nigger Heaven, then, was no surprise.

However, not all agreed with the Talented Tenth take on the novel. Others like Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes took a more moderate approach and said, although its title was offensive, the book was, indeed, a truthful reflection of Harlem life. Walter White and Nella Larsen were in the minority in their steadfast support of Van Vechten. They saw the success of Nigger Heaven as permission for them to celebrate Harlem life in all its manifestations, not just the portrayals approved by Talented Tenth society. They felt it was a passport to speak the truth about what was really going on in the black community, despite if it was uncomfortable for some. This newfound freedom was so welcome to Larsen and those that shared Larsen and White's views that in response to the majority's withering attacks on Van Vechten, Larsen suggested erecting a monument to the author. Ironically, the

book featured a character who was a librarian, just as Larsen was, so perhaps she was more than topically tied to the work. Yes, Nigger Heaven split the black literary community. Nonetheless, their early reviews raised some of the most vital issues in the furor surrounding the reception of Van Vechten's novel and ideologies of race during the Harlem Renaissance:

> What was the difference between 'white' and 'black' views of life in Harlem? Was the celebrated "New Negro" merely, as George Schuyler had argued in The Nation, a "lampblacked Anglo-Saxon" (663) or something entirely different? And if Negroes did possess their own separate "soul-world," as Langston Hughes contended ("Negro" 693), how were that world and its artistic inflections to be related to the political and social self-image of the black American community? These questions lurk uneasily behind the glamorous facade of the Harlem Renaissance. Nigger Heaven, whatever its questionable artistic value, brought them starkly to the forefront, crystallizing the concerns of racial confrontation and foreshadowing the bitterness that would inform later judgments about the Harlem Renaissance as a whole. (Worth 461)

Nigger Heaven's plot centered around a young man who abandons his lover for an older woman. When this woman rejects him for another man, the young man attempts to kill his usurper. This plot takes place in the center of Harlem.

In the shadow of the vehemence about Van Vechten's novel, in the fall of 1926 a group of young black writers produced Fire!!, their own literary magazine. With Fire!!, a new generation of young writers and artists, including Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston, took ownership of the literary content of the Harlem Renaissance:

> Fire!! symbolized the spirit and self-consciousness of these writers. The black intelligentsia, alerted by Charles S. Johnson's Civic Club

> dinner and Alain Locke's The New Negro, stood waiting like anxious parents to applaud the artistic endeavors flowing from the pens of their young writers. As the Renaissance took root, Harlem was transformed, at least in the popular mind, into a bohemia which not only housed a movement but which offered excitement and entertainment to those whites daring enough to venture uptown and directly sample the primitive and exotic pleasures that abounded there; this image of black bohemia also could be packaged and delivered to those less daring, who were content to experience Harlem vicariously through art, literature, and popular culture. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance would explore this bohemiain both their lives and their writings, and it would influence the literature that many of them produced. It gave birth to a fascination with black life and black culture that certainly helped account for the success of the Harlem Renaissance. (Wintz 87)

FIRE!! Expressed and celebrated those aspects of Harlem that the Talented Tenth were afraid of: sex, color consciousness, racism and self-hatred among African Americans, and the perception of blacks as primitive, wild, and dangerous. Larsen's sometime nemesis Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first and most vocal writers to join in the publication of FIRE!! and its call to arms. Larsen would also soon place her mark on this movement, but would do it in sometimes unpopular ways and those that veered from the direction from FIRE!!.

Looking in retrospect, after leaving nursing and working for the New York City Public Library for a time, Larsen was certified, in 1923, by the New York Public Library's library school, and she transferred to a position in the Manhattan branch. In 1926, having already made friends with important figures in the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen gave up her work as a librarian and began to work as a writer active in the literary community. As mentioned previously, Larsen had developed quite a close relationship with Carl Van Vechten and stayed friends with him despite the considerable amount of controversy with Nigger Heaven. In fact, Van Vechten encouraged Larsen to write about

African-American life while he gained perspective from her and Elmer on the subject matter of his novel, in which a black librarian was a central character, Nella's job at the time:

> He was convinced that Negroes' 'sensitiveness'- what Toomer referred to as a 'crust'- was preventing them from developing and exploiting their 'racial gifts' in music and literature. The inhibition pertained especially to the more 'colorful' and 'exotic' aspects of black life and culture, but Van Vechten did not encourage writing about these aspects alone. Much of what he was drafting stressed the untapped drama in the lives of striving professionals like those who were inviting him into their homes. Even these realms of black life, he believed, were not being explored freely and audaciously enough because of the resistance among African American themselves. (Hutchinson 195)

Nella would take his advice and veer from the racial uplift story and write about her own life, and redefine the mulatto forcing the question, "Is the mulatto tragic because he or she is half white. Or is the mulatto tragic because he or she is half black?" She would also begin to develop ideas about passing. There were hints in Larsen's fiction that she examines the validity of racial dichotomy, and like most other works about passing, it, at first, seems that Nella does not depict a passing story as a successful happy story of subverting the racial dichotomy and escaping the racial oppression, but her motives for this may have been different than other writers. Nella didn't at all reject the practice; at least she did not at first.

Her first publications were two articles about Danish games, published in the Brownies' Book, a children's magazine edited by Jessie Fauset. With the support of Van Vechten, Larsen published her first short story in January of 1926 in an issue of Young's Realistic Stories Magazine. While she continued to work at the New York Public Library, Larsen honed her writing skills, writing several pieces of short fiction which she

published, some under the pseudonym Allen Semi, her married name reversed. She was also at work on her first novel, Quicksand, which would be published, in 1928, to critical acclaim. Shortly after, she published her most noted work, Passing.

Despite her literary successes during the height of the Renaissance, things would again become dismal for Larsen. Next would come charges of plagiarism directed towards a short story Larsen published in 1930 entitled, "Sanctuary." "Sanctuary" closely bore a resemblance to Sheila Kaye-Smith's story "Mrs. Adis"(1919). Larsen's plot, and a little of the descriptions and dialogue are quite similar, but in comparison, "Sanctuary" is lengthier, surpasses Kaye-Smith in quality, and is much more explicit concerning issues of race than "Mrs. Adis". Larsen's work is also a tale written in an African-American context. Ironically, Kaye-Smith herself would later admit that she based "Mrs. Adis" on an old story by Saint Francis de Sales. And it is actually unknown whether Kaye-Smith ever knew of the Larsen controversy, as she herself never accused Larsen of stealing her story. Ironically, amid all of the accusations of plagiarism, Larsen received a Guggenheim Fellowship; she would be the first woman of color to receive the award. From 1930 to roughly 1931, Larsen spent time in Europe through support of the Guggenheim Grant. It was her opportunity to discover new themes and reflect on her career, but the time in Europe would not render another novel. Perhaps because it was during this time that she would learn of her husband's affair, back in the States, with a white woman.

Her childhood rejection because of her racial ambiguity and inability to pass for white was seemingly reiterated in her marriage to Elmer S. Imes, which eventually ended

in a bitter divorce in 1933. As one Larsen scholar explains, "the deterioration of the marriage was accelerated by the overt antipathy felt by Larsen's light-skinned mother-in-law and, significantly, by Imes's indiscreet affair with Ethel Gilbert, a white staff member at Fisk University, where Imes taught physics. " 'He liked white women,' several of Imes's friends remarked to Thadious Davis in explanation of his betrayal of Nella Larsen" (Sullivan 373). It is hardly incidental in Larsen's construction and subsequent dissolution of identity that the rival for her husband's affection was a white woman, and that she could therefore attribute most of her rejections in life to her inability to be sufficiently white or pass for white. Although there seemed to be other problems in the marriage noted by Larsen biographers, the divorce contains the hint of another unfortunate message that Larsen seemingly felt the world was giving. Biographers allude that Larsen, perhaps, saw that only those that are white or can pass for white lead comfortable and content lives in America. In effect, the rejections by her husband and absence of her family in her life may have exacerbated Larsen's loss of self and subsequent downward spiral. This destroyed the public identity as an author that replaced the personal identity she could not establish. And perhaps it was the last straw in Larsen's struggle to define herself, privately and publicly on her own terms. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Larsen had completely withdrawn from her literary and social life based in Harlem, New York. She felt alienated from liberal whites like Van Vechten, to whom she had always been grateful for accepting her. She saw Imes as her adversary. She lost contact with her publishers, friends and colleagues in the literary community. It was the end of the

Renaissance and the end of Larsen as a public literary figure. As Larsen disappeared, so did the richness and vibrancy of the place called Harlem:

> The Harlem Renaissance, which had begun with a burst of creativity in the mid-1920s, gradually dissipated in the early 1930s. Because a number of factors were involved in the decline of the Renaissance and because the movement itself was an abstract concept based on personal commitments and loyalties rather than on a single identifiable person or institution, it is difficult to pinpoint the moment of its death. For the individual writer the end of the Renaissance was a personal event occurring when he or she consciously disassociated from the movement. (Wintz 217)

Furthermore, Wintz notes:

> Black intellectuals also differed in their interpretation of exactly when the movement ended, with some, including historian John Hope Franklin and novelist John A. Williams, suggesting that the movement did not end but continued into the 1960s after undergoing changes in the 1930s. However, the Renaissance did not survive the 1930s. Although black literature continued to exist, it no longer focused on Harlem, and it was no longer dominated by the writers and intellectuals who had so monopolized black literature for a decade. (217)

As for Larsen, it is now known that she moved to Brooklyn, New York and made a living as a nurse for over twenty years. She apparently kept her former life as a Harlem socialite and critically acclaimed author a secret and kept the tragedies of her life, race, and history as turmoil to be suffered alone. No longer was she following either a marginal or a suppressive mode of adjustment to her problems of racial identity. She simply existed. Her black identity was something she had to accept. In all probability, by the end of the Harlem Renaissance, she had become firm enough that she no longer seemed outwardly bitter about the way she had been treated by her white family or about discrimination against mixed race individuals by America. This assumption is based on

the fact that she never mentioned her trials with race to her colleagues or the few people she befriended while working as a nurse for so many years. This was despite the fact that, at one time or another, she apparently experienced all the modes of adjustment in so far as race goes except for passing as white. Nevertheless, her life story demonstrates how difficult it can be for mulattoes to cope with the problems of racial identity under the one-drop rule. So Nella Larsen, the mulatto, unable to reconcile the color line, unable to define herself, unable to cope, disappeared from public life, silenced herself, and died in 1964, alone.

George Hutchinson suspects that she lay dead in her apartment for several days before anyone would discover her body, and she lay several more days in the morgue before anyone could be reached to identify and claim her body. Ironically, it was not a family member who ultimately claimed her, but a former nursing co-worker and friend, Alice Carper. It was also Carper who made Larsen's funeral arrangements. Carper was allowed back into Larsen's apartment to reconcile her estate, but by the time Carper got there, "All valuables had disappeared and the apartment looked like the scene of a burglary. None of Larsen's jewelry remained, none of her vases or antiques. All of her drawers had been pulled out and her papers scattered over the floor" (Hutchinson 480). Only a few co-workers attended Larsen's funeral, and the New York Times carried a brief obituary the day following the services stating, "Imes-Nella Larsen, died March 30, 1964, sister of Anna Larsen Gardener of California" (Hutchinson 480).

Ironically, Larsen, in 1963, made a trip to California in an attempt to see her white sister Anna Larsen Gardner. According to Thadious Davis, Larsen was rejected

once again by her sister who had not invited her into her home because Nella Larsen was so obviously a black woman, and her sister was white and without any visible connections to anyone of color. Later, Gardner denied knowing of Nella Larsen's existence at all, saying, "Why, I didn't know I had a sister." (Davis 448). Unfortunately again, this time in her death, her sister would again not acknowledge her existence.

CHAPTER IV

The Novels

While Nella Larsen was considered black by American standards, she wanted to be able to identify herself with both races and not be forced to choose, but she also eventually knew this was an unrealistic wish. Nella relates some of her own personal experiences, ideas, thoughts and beliefs into her novels, including Quicksand, which was her first novel that appeared in 1928, and Passing, her second novel which appeared in 1929. Both novels depict bits and pieces of Larsen's life; they involve semi-autobiographical accounts of women whose racial confusion contribute to their unfulfilled search for an identity in a society that dictated identity in an imprecise manner, and it is important to note this in any study of Larsen or her works. Indeed, because traditional studies of Harlem Renaissance literature have commonly disregarded the fictional efforts of Nella Larsen in order to concentrate on those of Zora Neale Hurston and the poetry of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and others, the fact remains that Larsen was writing notable fiction almost as soon as they were, and this fiction was very much a new breed of fiction that unapologetically used the author's unpopular views of race and racial definitions in the works. Her ideologies about mixed race individuals were very much different than her counterparts.

It is widely known that during the Harlem Renaissance that the popularity of

dealing with mixed race ideologies was to celebrate the diversity of African-American racial heritage, but also try to build African-American or black identity through the deep sentiment of race. Novels during this time, therefore, often made the light-skinned characters who could or did pass for white, return to the black community in which they had abandoned and attribute the most important component of racial identity to one's sense of racial loyalty to his or her black ancestry. This element was often the sole component in which to judge the value of one's blackness in these literary works. But did Nella conform to these standards in her novels? It is apparent by looking at her life that she, indeed, did not support the construction of race based on the racial dichotomy that America established, but rather challenged the systems and definitions of race. Race to Nella Larsen was not tied to some sort of moral obligation to be black no matter what, as other writers saw it, and Larsen made that clear. Nor did Larsen feel tied to a moral obligation to identify with both. Larsen's characters defined the ambiguity of using the terms and systems of race at all, and she did so in an eloquent way. In short, the novels were, indeed, well-written, despite not being well-received by some, and they sent a message of condemnation of racial labels by the author herself.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the general critical appraisal of Larsen as a writer has been indifferent. It seems that some critics have set out to destroy her novelistic credibility while others have tried to defend it. In fact, some critical commentary, both past and present, that has been applied to Larsen's work has done her literature a grave injustice. Critics have condemned her for not advocating the uplift of the race in her fiction more prominently, as if to suggest that represents true cultural

identity and conveys authentic ideologies of all black writers of the Renaissance. However unfair, it does, in part, explain the reason for her exclusion from a black literary kinship during the Harlem Renaissance that conveyed such intricate subjectivity. But it should be noted that Larsen's concerns highlight her strategy as a marginalized mixed race author in a black community. She included historical allusions that are important to her works and to her as an author, by countering the representation of the mulatto by non-mulatto writers.

Nevertheless, George Hutchinson's text is beginning to change the minds of many critics who once shared negative or indifferent views about Larsen. This text establishes Larsen's importance as a unique fiction writer of her time. Larsen used literary forms to challenge, head-on, myths and stereotypes regarding the cultural and historical representations of mixed-race individuals and the desire or need for some to pass as white. By manipulating the motifs of the sentimental novel, Larsen was able to tackle varied and complex issues, such as the validation of mixed-race individuals as a group unique and separate from African Americans and artificial racial constructs in America.

Larson expresses these thoughts in her first novel, Quicksand, through the main character Helga Crane, who is trapped by the duality of her background and the experiences of her life, neither of which she could control given America and its racial definitions. During the Harlem Renaissance, many literary works concentrated on celebrating black heritage. However, many other writers also began concentrating on more complex themes of race. Indeed, Larsen's Quicksand illustrates many elements of the complexities of race. These include a factor where mixed race individuals are

conceived of as controlled by sociological determinism and not by how they choose to define themselves. Helga Crane, Larsen's mixed race protagonist in Quicksand, illustrates the elements of both biological and sociological determinism in her inability to suppress her intuition to escape uncomfortable situations and to comfortably conform in either of her opposing communities, either black or white. In short, Helga Crane, instead of confronting and being strong by standing up to the American system of race definitions and surviving on her own terms, gives up and accepts what society says she ought to be, in any given situation. This is why Larsen dooms her. Larsen, herself, wanted to stand up against this system. What is ironic is that eventually Larsen herself would indeed meet the same fate of "giving up" as Helga Crane. Like Larsen, Helga Crane is a woman of mixed black and Danish heritage. When the book opens, she is teaching at a small college in Mississippi but then leaves for New York's, Harlem. Despite her preliminary satisfaction with Harlem's mostly African-American cosmopolitan life, Helga concludes that Harlem is too restricting, much the same reaction as Larsen had in her initial introduction to this world. In the novel, Helga leaves Harlem for Denmark. In the home of affluent Danish relatives, she is free to indulge in extravagancies. She draws attention to herself in the streets of Copenhagen because of her exotic mulatto appearance. This first is enjoyable but soon makes her feel objectified, like an "other," much the same way Larsen felt. Like Larsen, in the novel, Helga returns to New York only to find it even less welcoming to her as before.

Quicksand examines racial and cultural dualism. Unlike other writers, however, Larsen analyzed the theme from a personal psychological perspective rather than from a

purely sociological one. Helga's, like Larsen's, suffering lies in her refusal to accept the white American definition of black people. And both find that blacks' definitions of themselves are just as unsatisfactory because they are too dependent on the flawed images established in America.

George Hutchinson writes of the novel, that like many debut novels of the time, Quicksand was, indeed, largely autobiographical. And like many African-American or ethnic novels of the time, it focused on the individual and the consequences of choices the individual makes (Hutchinson 224). He further says:

> Larsen had never before exposed so much of her past or of her inner life, except possibly to Elmer. Here she gave vent to all her rage against the forces she had fought against so long – not, however, by following the life of a great heroine either triumphing over racism or being crushed by it. Helga Crane is a "mixed" person in more ways than one: often less than admirable; exquisitely sensitive and intelligent yet quiet; craving acceptance yet outwardly aloof or seemingly arrogant; of lower-class background yet to all appearances comfortable and well bred; defiant of restrictions yet willing at times to be used if it helps her get what she wants out of a relationship. (Hutchinson 224)

He further notes:

> To the extent that this is a self-portrait, it is a highly critical one, possibly an indication of the effect of 'self-observation with non-identification,' shorn of its metaphysical trappings. Yet the fact that the approach to the main character is naturalistic and unmelodramatic intensifies the force of the attack on social institutions in which Larsen herself had for so long been trapped" (Hutchinson 224).

Lastly, Hutchinson reminds the reader of the importance in not divorcing consideration of Larsen's own life from this work:

> Only with knowledge of Larsen's past and current connections can one appreciate the sheer audacity of the novel from its opening page. By the same token, if novelists live most intensely in the act of creating their

> fictions, and if Larsen revealed little of herself outside her stories, then examining Quicksand and its composition as a chapter in her life may have its rewards. Here Larsen emerges from the shadows and, finding her voice, provides an unprecedented vision of her world. (Hutchinson 224)

In Quicksand, Helga finds herself not being able to escape her inner self; she is trapped within the limitations of a stifling family life and a fear of being her true self. At the same time, Larson addresses the issue of race through Helga, who is an illegitimate, half-white and half-black female who is at the same time experiencing the post Civil War era and what racial implications it brought. Helga's problems were not only race and class; unfortunately, Helga's life revolved around the lack of socialism which was an issue that most women had in the early 1900s, but even more so if they had no community that they felt they could identify with fully.

The novel begins in the South, in a place called Naxos, Mississippi, where Helga teaches at a school that is supposed to be modeled after the early Tuskegee, where Larsen herself had briefly worked. Feeling put out of place by her upbringing and education, Helga leaves the security of her position there as well as the possibility of marriage to another teacher. She first travels to Chicago and then Harlem, New York. She finds that her mixed race background preoccupies her everywhere she travels, much like Larsen herself. Regrettably, when her unhappiness becomes a tough hatred for the people who have attempted to make friends with her, the same people she feels do not understand her experience as a mixed race woman in America; she leaves for Denmark, the birthplace of her mother, again, a direct correlation to Larsen's own life. Briefly, the moves do appear to be a reasonable answer to racism in America, just as traveling abroad seemed to be for Larsen herself; however, even there the painful reality of her mixed heritage can never be

escaped, just as with Larsen's own life.

In the novel, after two years in Denmark, Helga returns to America, once again to Harlem, still feeling the division of her life into two races, two cultural upbringings, and two countries. Although she believes that she has returned to her people, after six weeks, the old feeling of superiority over blacks who were so complacent about their lots begins to torment her once again. Helga feels as if she is an "other." And, indeed, she may have been right. Nonetheless, during a thunderstorm, she finds shelter in a Harlem storefront church and quickly becomes captivated by the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, whom she marries and follows to a rural Alabama town. She has one child followed by another. This hastily fastens Helga and her husband together, even though she realizes that she does not really love him at all. The story concludes with Helga feeling trapped as she expects yet another child, her fifth.

Helga's struggle to belong, her feeling of being immersed in quicksand, Larsen makes clear is the life of many mulattos, including herself. Her unhappiness is intensified by her inability to come to terms with her race and her discontent with the people around her. Much of this in the novel was, of course, drawn from the raw materials of Larsen's own troubled life as a mulatto. Martha Cutter, in her essay, "Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen's Fiction" notes:

> Nella Larsen's heroines all want to "pass". . . Yet how can "passing" for what one is not help an individual "to be a person"? Only when "passing" becomes a subversive strategy for avoiding the enclosures of a racist, classist, and sexist society does it become truly liberating. (75)

Larsen, herself, felt that she was not trying to avoiding any enclosures of race, class, or sex, but simply be able to acknowledge her diversity. Unfortunately, race, class, and sex were very much a part of the standards of identity in the world in which she lived, and were, therefore, unavoidable- no matter how much she tried. In this novel, Helga Crane is a model for this:

> Helga Crane attempts to use 'passing' as a way of finding a unitary sense of identity- a sense of identity structured around one role, a role that somehow corresponds to her 'essential self.' Although Helga Crane passes for many things (an exotic other, a committed teacher, an art object, a devout Christian, a proponent of racial uplift, a dutiful mother) she is only, at any given point in her career, one of these things. So, in the end, she cannot resist the enclosures of her world and becomes entrapped in one stifling and constricting role. (Cutter 75)

This is similar to Larsen herself. Only when Larsen felt the entrapment, rather than face the definitions and limitations society placed upon individuals like her, she withdrew from the society, and settled on simply existing. Of course, no one can really speculate as to whether this actually gave Larsen a contented or discontented existence in the latter portion of her life. Considering all of the above, criticism of Quicksand should definitely begin a greater focus on the issue of the text as autobiographical fiction. Quicksand, in the matter of specific incident, has little enough to do with Nella Larsen, but it is imbued with her own personality and feeling, her views of the subjects discussed, so that to a person who has no previous knowledge of the author's own history, it reads like real autobiography. Helga Crane can be interpreted as Larsen's alter-ego.

However, further complications remain to be explored. Some critics would argue that one underestimates the complexity of the text when one poses the question of the

narrator's position as an either/or suggestion. Either the anonymous narrator of the novel is to be taken as the autobiographical representative of Larsen's views on race and class or her background is to be ignored altogether. This remarkable and startlingly new representation of conditions brought about by the race question in the United States makes no particular petition for the mulatto, but shows a dispassionate, though sympathetic ideal that actually exists concerning the color line. Certainly, Larsen's text was innovative in its attempt to treat differences and divisions within the black race, as well as those between blacks and whites in America. She thus presented the issue of race in America as much more than a simple binary opposition, introducing into the discussion complicating factors such as class, geography, ethnicity, education, and gradations of color. She demonstrates that the subject positions of black Americans are not fixed by race alone, but are multiple and shifting. On the surface, this is a simple pledge of cross-cultural education conducted by an insider. The promise is that the exotic "other" - "the mulatto" -will at last be entirely revealed to the scrutinizing gaze of the dominant culture and to non-mixed race African Americans, who are invited to join what has previously been a closed or secret society. That America's racial definitions have literally enclosed the mulatto is not mentioned, nor is the question of whether mulattos like Larsen wish its inner life to be exposed considered. The right to know and to gain power from knowledge goes unquestioned.

Nella Larsen's second novel, Passing, on the other hand, concentrates on the issue of skin color and the act of passing for white prominently. It is easy to see from racial

classifications in the United States that every person classified as black in America is not the same shade. Many people of color were affected by this both dark- and light-skinned, especially during Nella Larsen's era. While the light-skinned black people were dominating the black establishments, the dark-skinned black people were feeling rejection from their own kind. Passing addresses this issue through the character of Clare Kendry who was an attractive light-skinned, long-haired woman who manages to escape poverty by passing for a white woman. She marries a wealthy white man who also believes that she is white as well. Her journey across the color line is completely successful until she reunites with her old friend Irene:

> For Larsen, too, 'race' is inextricable from the collateral issues - including class, gender, sexuality, and rivalry-that bear upon the formation of identity. 'Passing,' of course, alludes to the crossing of the color line that was once so familiar in American narratives of 'race,' but in Larsen's novel the word also carries its colloquial meaning - death. Thus, Passing's title, like the title of Larsen's earlier Quicksand, hints at the subject's disappearance in the narrative, or the possibility of aphanisis, which Jacques Lacan defines in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis as the disappearance of the subject behind the signifier. (Sullivan 1)

Sulllivan further observes the issues of race and passing, specifically of the matters concerning the characters, Irene and Clare:

> For Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew, the 'twin' protagonists of Passing, the obliterating signifier is nigger, a word that comes to encapsulate their struggle with the conflicts of American racism and assimilation. The narrative representation of these conflicts also suggests at a symbolic level Larsen's repetition and working through of her own anxieties about the rejection she experienced as a result of her racial identity. (1)

The novel Passing begins with a chance encounter between Clare and Irene in a restaurant atop a hotel in Chicago, where the two women have sought relief from the summer heat. Since the restaurant does not serve black people, both women are passing; though in Irene's case, it is simply for the convenience of a cool place to rest. The women have not seen each other in years because Clare crossed the invisible color line when she married a white man who does not know of her racial background. Ironically, she chose a racist husband who is a constant reminder of her real heritage. In the novel, Jack, Clare's husband, is like most whites of the time. He defines race by sight mostly-oblivious to the fact that his own wife is African American or black. "I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (Larsen 201).

At any rate, after the initial encounter between the two old friends, Clare does everything she can to continue her meetings with Irene, once the two women return to New York City where they both live. Clare invites Irene to the tea party. The party plays an important role throughout the story because Jack enters the story here. Jack's dislike of African Americans becomes apparent here. He married Clare without knowing her secret ancestry, and it is obvious that this deception is wearing on Clare. At the party, Jack says things that humiliate African Americans and shows his hatred towards blacks. In opposition to his statements, Irene exposes that Jack is "surrounded by three black devils" (172). It is noteworthy that Irene includes Clare as one of the "black devils." This means that Irene categorizes Clare as a part of the black community even though Clare is

successfully passing as white. This incident strikes Clare and leads her to remind herself that she has a dual racial background, one side of which she has completely abandoned because of the pressures of American racial categories. However, this is a side she wishes she could reclaim.

Jack's and Irene's statements at the party lead to her transformation throughout the story. She just wants to be a person, not a race. Clare stands as a model for Larsen's ideologies of how the ambiguities of race can complicate an individual's life. Clare, in fact, becomes desperate for contact with black people that she does not have to "pass" around. She hopes that these individuals will not force her to decide on a racial side. She, however, becomes disappointed by these expectations. Indeed, Irene is fascinated by her friend's dual life, but she is not entirely comfortable with her choices.

Charles Larsen observes a passage in which "Larsen states of Irene's curiosity, 'She wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly" (qtd. in Larsen 293). In short, Clare is confused by a system of definitions that are supposed to determine who she is. Irene also gets confused at her values of life after the party. Indeed, she feels no need to pass because she "[has] everything [she wants]" at the beginning of the story (160). However, this self-confidence breaks down when she faces Jack's words about blacks at the party. "I don't dislike [Negroes], I hate them (172)." Here, Jack represents the racism embedded in American culture. Irene feels anger; however, Jack's statements make her realize that she too is powerless against the American system of racial

definitions. It proves that her status still contains insecurity because she has chosen to live as black. She cannot be entirely secure as long as she has made this choice. Her recognition of this begins to drive an admiration of Clare and her choice to pass. After the party, Irene says passing is "disapproved" of and looked at with "contempt" among the black community, but at the same time people "condone" and "admire" it (186).

To further complicate the story, Irene Redfield is married to a good-looking and successful black doctor who Clare finds herself attracted to, and he to her, so Clare decides to, against her better judgment, pursue him. This happens simultaneously with Clare's husband finding that she is, indeed, a black woman. During the dramas played out next, Irene becomes conscious of Clare's threat to her marriage and arranges for Clare's disappearance. Clare falls to her death from an open window just before her husband is about to confront her with his discovery of her black ancestry. Passing can also be related to Nella Larsen's actual life; she was also a light-skinned woman who dominated the black intellectual establishments. It is not the assumption here that Nella Larsen wanted to cease being black and become white, but she wanted to have equality in part because she was partially white, and in part because she wanted blacks and whites to have equal rights. It is also no surprise that the subject of Larsen's two novels is mixed race ideologies in America. Helga Crane in Quicksand finds herself tangled between the races for a good deal of her life, so trapped that she is more lonely than anything else because she has come to accept that she belongs in neither world. A disclosure that this author assumes Larsen made about herself. And Clare Kendry, in Passing, dies because

she has lived as a white person and regrettably learns that she would rather be black, but can't. For Clare Kendry, having to decide on a race for herself would lead to her destruction. For both lead characters, color was all defining and all destroying.

It would be the same for Nella Larsen herself. Larsen lived most of her life torn in-between two very different worlds, her affinities being with both of them. Her life reflected the dilemma of being caught in-between two races and cultures. She spent most of her adult life traveling and searching for a home, wanting desperately to fit in somewhere. When she disappeared from the Harlem Renaissance, and found her situation to be easier living in virtual obscurity.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Although her career was cut short, Larsen is an important novelist. Both Quicksand and Passing portray the loves of women of mixed ancestry skillfully. Larsen's novels dispel the myth of the tragic mulatto that had been depicted in earlier fiction and treated the complex subject of "passing" and "double consciousness" in a unique manner from a personal perspective. Her works are void of rhetoric and the promotion of racial uplift causes. Rather, she and her works present intricate psychological studies of the interconnection between mixed race ideologies and Harlem Renaissance literature and culture.

What can be learned from Nella Larsen's life and literature is that no matter if a person of mixed race does not feel the need to choose a racial side, America or someone else will choose for them. America's ambiguous race classification system still exists, and it has changed little from the time directly preceding the Harlem Renaissance until now. A mulatto in America is forced to choose the black side and deny white traditions or be called a race traitor. These practices force people, not unlike Nella Larsen, into lives of racial ambiguity and strife. Although it is obvious that Larsen enjoyed reasonable notoriety during her lifetime, having been an associate of Carl Van Vechten, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Faucet, and with acclaim to her novels Quicksand and

figure of the Harlem Renaissance and her importance to further understanding mixed race ideologies during this time still remained unnoticed, and recognition of her contributions to the American literary canon is still minimal. It was not until 2006 and Georgia Hutchinson's, In Search of Nella Larsen: a Biography of the Color Line, that her unseen portrait became recognized and acknowledged for her exquisite presence in a time of turmoil. The relationship between Larsen's personal philosophy regarding race in twentieth-century America and her fiction prompted an unrivaled examination of American's view of race and racial definitions. The areas touched specifically are the struggle for identity and passing in the mixed race individual. As has been suggested in this study, Larsen was fully aware of the problematic relationships of blacks and whites. Her novels suggest how color and race mixing have affected the familial structure. However, what is more prevalent in the novels was her focus on the individual's struggle with race independently of the society in which they live. In sum, Larsen touches upon issues that some writers did not want to address in a forthright manner, particularly since their works attracted a public of either predominately white readers or predominately black readers. Hence, Larsen became taboo by some critical standards.

This study finds that Harlem Renaissance fiction has produced a literary history that is characterized by some obvious deletions. Those deletions include, in particular, the experiences of the internal structure of the mulatto in the wake of decisions to pass or live as a marginalized person. The fiction before Larsen often did not show what mulattos feel in their hearts and souls about family, race, and self identity; only their external circumstances are shown. This was due in part to the fact that fiction about mixed race individuals was often not written by an individual of mixed race or the

individuals writing were often stifled by societal constraints. Larsen reveals the typical nature of race relations and the life of a mixed race individual by examining the whole of society through the eyes of her characters and their families. In doing so, she offers an unprecedented look at the daily lives of such persons and the social and cultural forces which kept them together with a certain racial or culture or sometimes drove them away from a racial and cultural group. The relationship between Larsen's personal philosophy regarding race in twentieth century America and her fiction prompted an unrivaled examination of the mulatto and the practice of passing. The areas touched specifically are the struggle for community involvement, economic security and individual awareness. As has been suggested in this study, Larsen was fully aware of the problematic relationships of blacks and whites. Her novels suggest how color, race mixing, and race definitions affected the familial structure of mixed race individuals. However, what is more prevalent in the novels was her focus on these individuals independently of the society in which they lived. This was done by focusing on the family functions, composition and on the roles of husbands, wives, and children.

In sum, Larsen touches upon issues that some black writers did not want to address, particularly since they did not live such an experience. Hence, Larsen became taboo by some critical standards. Unfortunately, the critical focus on the tragic mulatto motifs overshadowed the underlying message in her fiction. At the same time, however, a tradition that strayed away from typical view of the mulatto and the practice of passing became evident in Larsen's fiction. Mulattos are seen in urban environments rather than in the typical Southern rural setting. They are depicted as educated and striving for economic independence, and they are not always 'tragic' figures but humans with

extraordinary drive. Larsen would be a voice for any cause she found worthy, and that is what made her strong. Harper never separated her life and work. She used her life experiences as a mixed race woman living in the early twentieth century to call attention to the negative issues facing this emerging cultural group.

Unfortunately, many of these issues still exist: "Larsen's childhood rejection was seemingly reiterated in her 1919 marriage to Elmer S. Imes, which ended in a much-publicized divorce in 1933. As Ann Allen Shockley explains, the deterioration of the marriage was accelerated by the overt antipathy felt by Larsen's light-skinned mother-in-law and, significantly, by Imes's indiscreet affair with Ethel Gilbert, a white staff member at Fisk University, where Imes taught physics (438). "He liked white women," several of Imes's friends remarked to Thadious Davis in explanation of his betrayal of Nella Larsen (362). It is hardly incidental in Larsen's construction and subsequent dissolution of identity that the rivals for her husband's affection were both "white" women, and that she could therefore attribute the second major rejection in her emotional life to her inability to be sufficiently white (5). Although there were many problems in the Larsen-Imes union, the divorce contains the hint of another command to "turn white or disappear," the imperative that Frantz Fanon suggests is implicit in all interracial dialogue (100). In effect, the rejections by her family and by her husband, exacerbated by the "problem of authorship" stemming from charges of plagiarism in the "Sanctuary" affair (Dearborn 56), destroyed the identity Larsen consciously cultivated during the 1920s, and provoked her disappearance from public life." (Sullivan 1).

Indeed, all of the Harlem Renaissance's glory days were essentially gone by 1940. So Larsen disappeared along with an era. Attention about race and individual

identity was replaced with the economic fallout from the Great Depression. But the Great Depression was not the biggest reason for the disintegration of the Renaissance. Problems had existed under the surface for many years. These problems, however, were easily overlooked when the money from white patrons and recognition by the white literary world as a whole were plentiful for writers like Larsen. Once opportunity disappeared and personal demons got in the way, the artists of the Renaissance began to divide more. There was the group that believed the arts should honor racial uplift in all its variety, whereas there was still a group that felt the arts should work as publicity to uplift the status of African Americans. And yes, there were those that remained in the gray area, like Larsen, who instead chose the silence of simply writing. Though these divisions had nothing to do directly with the Great Depression, they made it impossible for African Americans to face the economic disaster with a unified front. Debates concerning views on race within the community continued, but Larsen didn't have any fight left in her.

Why did Larsen elect to disappear? Perhaps the answer lies in the personal motivations of Larsen, in her impulsion for her will to be who she was. Indeed, Larsen's writings captured the spirit and ideologies of a unique time in American history. She saw the complexities of her personal identification with that world.

While it can not be stated that she saw either steadily or whole, it is evident that her vision resulted from her connection with her time. Perhaps then, like others such as Wallace Thurman, she was more a victim of the Renaissance than has been previously assumed. Had she completed her forgotten manuscripts, she may have emerged from the Renaissance with a more substantial principle, an ease with her identity. Yet that, in all

probability, may not have altered the estimation of her relationship to the time, for Larsen was a writer inspired to write by the confluence of life in Harlem and America, and limited as well by those very entities. Alain Locke stated that the significance of Larsen's writings beyond their applicability as a social document rests in their dealing with a topic that was seldom in the foreground of African American fiction. "Indeed this whole side of the problem which was once handled exclusively as a grim tragedy of blood and fateful heredity now shows a tendency to shift to another plane of discussion as the problem of individual loyalties and the issue of the conflict of cultures" (Romano 215).

The Harlem Renaissance, a movement that built a race, was ultimately divided by race, and it fragmented the era's unity, and many of its participants, Larsen among them, faded into obscurity.

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